



A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa, Third Edition

By Johan Marais (with Luke Kemp), 2022, Struik Publishers, Cape Town, 360 pp, approx. 800 colour photographs ISBN 978 1 77584 747 2. [Also available in Afrikaans], ZAR 410–480 (softcover).

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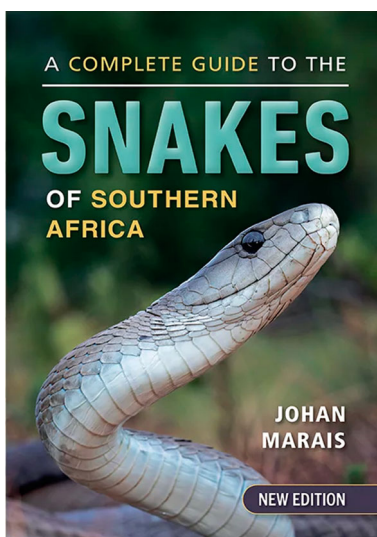
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BOOK REVIEW

A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa, Third Edition, By Johan Marais (with Luke Kemp), 2022, Struik Publishers, Cape Town, 360 pp, approx. 800 colour photographs ISBN 978 1 77584 747 2. [Also available in Afrikaans], ZAR 410–480 (softcover).



The new edition of *A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa* represents the third iteration in a series of books that started three decades ago. The latest edition replaces the 2004 edition (Marais 2004)—an excellent book in its own right (Bauer 2004). In the nearly two decades since the last edition, there have been several important advances in the study of snakes in southern Africa. These include changes in systematics and the description of new species, a substantial formalisation of conservation assessment processes, and the remarkable growth of citizen/community science platforms that have improved the quantity and quality of geographic distribution data and natural history information. Accordingly, the revised edition of this book is timely and welcome.

The book is softcover, available in English and Afrikaans, and comprises 360 glossy pages. As with the second edition, the book is divided into ten sections: 'Introduction'; 'How to use this book'; 'Biology and behaviour'; 'Classification and relationships'; 'Snakebite'; 'Snakes in captivity'; 'Species accounts'; 'Glossary'; 'Bibliography'; and 'Index'. The introduction retains many elements from the previous edition, including a section dispelling myths, but has been augmented with a substantial section focused on photographing snakes. The section covering snakebite and its treatment has been substantially updated, and now includes expanded information on the treatment of snakebite in humans and pets/domestic animals. The section on biology and behaviour has been substantially expanded and revised, and now offers a very useful basic introduction to snake biology. Similarly, the classification and

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relationships section (contributed by Aaron Bauer and Lynn Raw) has been substantially expanded and revised and now includes excellent, accessible explanations of evolutionary trees, molecular phylogenetics, and the science of systematics and taxonomy.

Each of the 174 species or subspecies in the region is covered in its own account. Each account covers one to three pages (typically two). The English name and scientific name, as well as a variable number of alternative names, mostly Afrikaans and English, exceptionally IsiZulu or IsiXhosa, are included. Information regarding each taxon is arranged under sub-headings: 'Length'; 'Scales'; 'Colour'; 'Habitat and distribution'; 'Behaviour'; 'Similar species'; 'Enemies and threats'; 'Food and feeding'; 'Reproduction'; 'Danger to humans'; and (where necessary) 'Venom'. Information under these sub-headings ranges from highly technical (e.g. each 'Scales' subsection includes detailed lepidosis for identification of the taxon) to very general (e.g. the 'Enemies and threats' subsections are mostly broad generalisations).

Similar to the previous edition, each account is accompanied by a number of graphical objects, including a "danger bar" (indicating whether the snake is harmless, dangerous, mildly venomous, or highly venomous), an updated distribution map showing the geographical range of the taxon within southern Africa, a size comparison graphic relating a typically sized individual snake to a 1.8 m tall human or a 0.6 m human arm, a selection of icons depicting the primary habitat and activity phase of the animal, and a side-view line drawing of the snake's head showing scalation. These graphical objects offer easy access to information for lay readers, but as highlighted for the previous edition (Bauer 2004), probably offer technical readers limited value. The most notable advance in the accounts is the greatly expanded 'Key Features' box, which includes bulleted text similar to that used in the 'Look out for' boxes of the previous edition, as well as deep etched photographs, with annotations that illustrate important attributes for commonly encountered taxa. Accounts for medically-important species also include a 'First-Aid Procedures' box.

All taxa but two (*Leptotyphlops pungwensis* and *L. telloi*) are illustrated by unsurprisingly excellent colour photographs. In general, each taxon is represented by several photographs that show the whole animal, a close-up photograph of the head, and, in species that exhibit important ontogenetic or geographical variation in colour or pattern, a variety of photographs that encapsulate that variation. In some instances, photographs that show feeding, sloughing, or defensive behaviours are also provided. The wide range of high-quality images reflect both Marais' own efforts to capture new photographs of as many species as possible and also the growing network of talented photographers in the region.

The 'Glossary' is retained from the second edition. The 'Bibliography' includes over 200 entries representing an eclectic, but non-exhaustive reading list.

Errors were exceptionally rare and always minor in nature. My reading revealed only a few minor errors: two typographical errors, inconsistency in the application of journal title abbreviations in the bibliography, a single case of referring to an out-dated conservation assessment from 1988 as being "the latest", and the technically inaccurate claims that solenoglyphous and proteroglyphous dentitions are unique to vipers and elapids, respectively. Beyond that, I was frustrated at times that the line drawings showing head scalation didn't always reflect the typical scale arrangement described in the text. However, this inconsistency is understandable given how variable such arrangements can be in some species. Overall, the production is of exceptionally high quality and all involved must be congratulated.



Like its predecessor, this book offers exceptional value to a range of users. Through its augmented information on snake biology and systematics, improved infographics for identifying snakes, up-to-date distribution maps, and staggering selection of illustrative photographs, this book will make snake biology and identification more accessible to the general public.

Moreover, the book also makes an excellent addition to the library of any herpetologists interested in the biology of snakes, southern African or otherwise.

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